

Stephen J. Shoemaker, *Creating the Qur'an: A Historical-Critical Study*

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The main purpose of this volume is to study the emergence of the Qur'an from a historical-critical perspective, using the tools and methods applied by religious and biblical studies to analyze biblical and other religious texts. Although the author sought to engage with the Qur'an as a late ancient biblical apocryphon in the Near East as part of a project in the Regensburg Center for Advanced Study researching Christian canon during late antiquity, his realization of how "underresearched" the formative period of the Qur'an was, shifted his focus on the latter subject (p. x).

In the introduction, the author discusses the different approaches applied to the study of Islamic history and the emergence of the Qur'an comparing the religious studies departments in North America and the practice of *Religionsgeschichte* as it emerged at the University of Göttingen. He argues that while the studies conducted by the former usually result in the repetition of the traditional Islamic narrative, the latter provides a critical-historical perspective on the subject, which is usually in conflict with the traditional narrative. In chapter 1, with accordance to the radically historicized methods of *Religionsgeschichte*, Shoemaker aims to demonstrate the unreliable nature of the traditional Islamic sources emphasizing the conflicting reports in the literature itself and highlighting that the earliest Islamic sources were penned down considerably later in relation to the events that ultimately led to the canonization of the Qur'an.

In chapter 2, Shoemaker argues that the canonization of the Qur'an seems only possible under a powerful state authority. He argues that prior to 'Abd al-Mālik's reign, the Islamic state in Yathrib didn't have the necessary

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state apparatus to unify the various recitations under one text, and therefore the first three caliphs couldn't canonize the Qur'an and enforce its implementation throughout the Islamic empire. Shoemaker states that if an early version of the Qur'an compiled by 'Uthmān did indeed exist, it should be identified merely as one of the companion codices circulating in that era. He also utilizes contemporary non-Islamic sources, such as the work of John Damascus that seem to prove his theory that the process of the canonization of the Qur'an occurred during the reign of 'Abd al-Mālik, concluding that Islamic traditions that date the fixation and canonization of the consonantal text to an earlier date should be dealt with caution.

In chapter 3, the author brings to attention the unreliability of radiocarbon dating on the earliest Qur'anic manuscripts. He points out that the precision required is hardly achieved using this method alone. Shoemaker insists that paleographic evidence should be used alongside carbon dating to achieve more accurate dates regarding the composition of these manuscripts.

Chapters 4 and 5 are dedicated to the environment in which the Qur'an originated. Shoemaker refutes the idea of a wealthy Mecca at the crossroad of the trade or mining network, relying mostly on the works of Patricia Crone. He also calls into question the literary environment of the Hījāz during late antiquity, insisting that the conditions in Mecca and Yathrib make it rather highly improbable for the Qur'an to be written down to any significant extent during Muhammad's lifetime. Therefore, Shoemaker concludes that the reports of Muhammad's scribes in the Islamic tradition "*must be, again the innocent inventions of medieval Islamic intellectuals who were projecting the conditions of their own circumstances back onto the memories of the life of their revered founder*" (p.122). These two chapters are steppingstones to the idea that the Qur'an and its contents could not have originated in the Hījāz but rather in an environment where there is adequate literacy and biblical culture for its origination such as the Levant.

Chapter 6 is probably the most interesting part of the volume dealing with memory science and eyewitness testimonies. It is argued that accounts passed on by individuals, unless immediately documented, are constructions and reconstructions of the original account which cannot preserve its accuracy. The author reaches the conclusion that this is most probably the case with the companions and the transmissions from the companions by later sources regarding the Qur'an. In chapter 7, building on chapter 5 and the insights from memory science in chapter 6, the author believes that the oral transmissions of the Qur'an and its formative period must have been re-formulated with every transmission, with the gist of the traditions (such as key phrases) roughly protected but the gaps been filled

with materials according to the needs of the transmitters, who were surrounded with the diverse biblical culture of the newly conquered lands. So was the case with the formative period of Christianity and so must it be in the case of early Islam (p.172). Shoemaker also states that setting aside the impossibly late date suggested by Wansbrough for the Qur'an's final composition, "*in the end John Wansbrough was basically correct in his hypothesis that the traditions of the Qur'an were formed largely in the 'sectarin milieu' of Syro-Palestine and Mesopotamia*" (p.198).

In an effort to better integrate the study of the Qur'an with biblical studies, the author introduces the term *hypomnēma* in chapter 8 to describe the ongoing process of writing down the Qur'anic text prior to its canonization. This term is used in biblical studies to describe early biblical texts as memorandums that were designed not with the intention to supplant the oral tradition, but rather to act as mnemonic aides during the critical phase of transition from an oral to a written cultural paradigm. These memorandums, according to the biblical studies literature, were frequently changed and reformulated in accordance with the needs of the preacher and the particular audience to whom they were delivered. Shoemaker borrows this concept to explain the formulation of the companion codices and the differences between them, thus highlighting the fluidity of the texts before canonization. He then posits that the Qur'an's unique structural arrangement, its elliptic style and the existence of synoptic verses post-canonization by 'Abd alMālik can be attributed to the malleable nature of these early memoranda, which served as source material in the process of canonization.

Finally in chapter 9, the Qur'an's historical context is analyzed with respect to its contents. Shoemaker, again relying on previous works such as of Patricia Crone, focuses on the traditions that were either incomprehensible by later exegetes or that imply and refer to concepts and vocabulary (fishing, farming, olives etc.) that should be (according to him) foreign to the Hījāz and its inhabitants. The author offers two possible explanations leaning toward the second: 1) These parts were from a text that predated Muhammad. 2) These were additions made by later Believers to the oral tradition as part of the natural process after their conquest of the Levant and Iraq. Shoemaker insists that the Qur'an's biblical material is that of a nature that only a highly Christianized audience would make sense of it. Therefore, these verses were most probably added after the Believer's expansion into Christian lands. Shoemaker has two building blocks that support this theory: 1) There is no evidence of Christian existence in the Hījāz. 2) The towns of Mecca and Yathrib do not have any ties, especially trade wise with the Christian South or North of Hījāz. However, he also

admits that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, and that there may have been a society where the Christian culture was vibrant but was ignored by later Islamic traditions. He sees this as unlikely due to the mention of the Jews in Yathrib by the Islamic tradition. Accordingly, he posits that there would be no benefit in excluding the Christians and mentioning the Jews for the Islamic, specifically concerning its collective memory.

Finally in the conclusion, after a summary of the results of the previous chapters, Shoemaker addresses the possible objections towards this research from scholars, who according to the author adhere to the methods of the protectionist discourse rather than the approaches suitable to the tradition of *Religionswissenschaft*. He insists that we can concern ourselves with both the Qur'an as a new identity document and with its connections to the broader religious context simultaneously. He argues that the latter method will better enable us to understand the Qur'an's development as a new text that is far more integrated with the religions of late antiquity than the Islamic narrative would allow. However, Shoemaker also asserts that this approach should not be reductive of the Qur'an by focusing only on its derivatives from the other religious traditions of the era.

The study of the Qur'an and its relation to the religions of late antiquity is a subject full of potential, and as this study advocates there is indeed "*substantial continuity rather than difference between Islam and these traditions*" (p. 10). However, the insistence that this continuity expresses itself during the finalization and canonization of the contents of the Qur'an in Mesopotamia with strong influence from biblical scripture and culture is debatable.

First, the evaluation of the Islamic traditions as mere outputs of the collective memory with little to no historical accuracy to the accounts it narrates must be reconsidered. In other words, there should be a distinction between the meticulous study of the Islamic sources and with its near complete omission as a valuable historical source to the formative period of Islam. It should not be forgotten that the literature on *Rijāl* and *al-Jarḥ wa al-Ta'dīl* in the Islamic tradition deals specifically with the problems mentioned in chapter 6 concerning the character of the transmitters, the reliability and the capacity of their memory and the veracity of their eyewitness testimonies. This self-awareness on part of the Islamic tradition deserves reconsideration. One should note that not even al-Bukhārī's *Ṣaḥīḥ*, whom the author identifies in chapter 1 as the formulator of the traditional Islamic tradition on the emergence of the Qur'an from various competing reports, was safe from the criticism of later scholars towards its contents. Moreover, the use of contemporary reports by non-Islamic sources on the canonization of the Qur'an, such as the works of John of

Damascus, is debatable considering their polemical attitude and nature. Therefore, claims made by these sources accusing the Believers with editing the Qur'an during the reign of 'Abd al-Mālik should not be evaluated as impartial and well-informed observations on the formative history of the Qur'an.

Second, the insistence that the Hījāz was not a probable environment to the final version of the Qur'an based on its content, vocabulary and the state of literacy in the Hījāz invites substantial debate. The presence of concepts such as fishing and farming in the Qur'anic verses should not be seen as contradictory evidence to their Hījāzi origin solely on the premise that the Hījāzi environment is not suitable for these activities. One should also tread with caution when dismissing the presence of any biblical knowledge or culture in the Hījāz, while its South and North is surrounded with biblical heritage. Although one can debate the frequency and the effectiveness of the communications between the Hījāz and its neighboring communities, it seems improbable that there was no communication or any exchange of biblical culture or knowledge whatsoever. Therefore, the idea that the biblical material in the Qur'an could have only originated and added to the text after the conquests of lands vibrant with biblical culture, simply due to the absence of physical evidence of such culture in the Hījāz -which may or may not have survived- merits reconsideration. The same reconsideration should also be exercised to the argument grounded in the lack of physical evidence regarding literacy in Arabia. This is even more necessary after the recent findings and evaluations on the topic by Ahmad al-Jallad from the inscriptions in the Hījāz.¹

Third, while recognizing their significance, the application of the conclusions derived from memory science and collective memory, as presented in chapters 6 and 7 to the Qur'an itself should be reevaluated. Perhaps a more appropriate application would be in studies involving *asbāb al-nuzūl* (occasions of revelations) and Qur'anic exegesis where the individual memory and comprehension of the transmitter significantly influence the contents being conveyed.

The readers of this volume should also be aware of the argumentative style implemented by the author wherein probable evidence is presented and conclusions are derived with an air of certitude. For example, while presenting the non-Islamic sources of the era, Shoemaker emphasizes John of Damascus's role as secretary and chief financial officer for 'Abd

1 "Ahmad Al-Jallad [II]: What Pre-Islamic Arabia was Like Based on the Epigraphic Evidence," YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8fkfYOduc8>, March 20, 2023.

al-Mālik and concludes that he was “*well-positioned to have gathered some of the best information about Islam that could be acquired*” (p. 50). After discussing some of his accounts which do not represent the current Qur'anic text, Shoemaker comes to the conclusion that these were fragments of the Qur'an prior to its canonization. He defends his decision on the basis that John was “*extremely well-informed and well-connected*” (p. 52) due to his administrative position in the Caliphate. It is prudent for a discerning reader to distinguish between being well-connected and well-informed, particularly considering John's role as a secretary and chief financial officer, which is distinct from a religious one. Another use of this style is evident in chapter 7, where the author explores the impact of collective memory could have had on Muhammad's followers. Initially he states that Muhammad's followers “*would have naturally adjusted their memories of him and the foundation of their community*” (p. 190). However, his tone later shifts to assert with confidence that “*Muhammad's followers surely ascribed to him deeds and words that he never said or did as their collective memory developed*” (p. 191). While it is understandable to paint a probabilistic picture derived from the application of the results of memory science, which were conducted in the 20th century, such a high degree of certainty in its implications calls for a more cautious approach.

As Herbert Berg has stated, the disagreement between the revisionist approach and the traditionalist approach to early Islamic History will continue to exist as “*each paradigm produces results that are consistent with that paradigm and so confirm it.*”² In this context, *Creating the Qur'an* provides the reader with up-to-date insights on the subject from a revisionist perspective and therefore is a must-read for all those with a scholarly pursuit in the history of the Qur'an. Fortunately, it is part of the University of California Press's Open Access publishing program for monographs Luminos and is available for all those interested.

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- 2 Berg Herbert, “Competing Paradigms in the Study of Islamic Origins: Qur'an 15:89-91 and the Value of Isnāds”, *Method and Theory in the Study of Islamic Origins*, ed. Berg Herbert, vol. 49 of *Islamic History and Civilization Studies and Texts*, ed. Wadad Kadi and Rotraud Wielandt (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 261.